

# Conflict Sociology

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# Conflict Sociology

## A Sociological Classic

### Updated

Randall Collins

Abridged and Updated by  
Stephen K. Sanderson

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## *Editor's Preface*

I first read *Conflict sociology* in 1976, not long after it appeared. I knew immediately that its author, a very young thirty-four-year-old sociologist named Randall Collins, whom I had never heard of, was destined to become one of our greatest sociologists. I am very pleased that I have turned out to be right. I have followed Collins's work for years and read most of it, all of the books and the vast majority of the most important articles. It impresses me enormously. Although I do not agree with everything that Collins says, I agree with a large chunk of it, and I think that a conflict approach is the best way to go in contemporary sociology. Although Collins is world renowned, he has never achieved the godlike status accorded to Parsons and Merton, or more recently to Giddens, Bourdieu, Habermas, and Foucault. In a survey of sociological theorists I did a dozen or so years ago (Lord and Sanderson, 1999), Collins ranked seventh as the most important theorist, after those six theorists named previously. But in my opinion he should have been rated first. His ideas are better and far more sensible, much more closely tied to the findings of empirical research, and expressed in a much clearer and unpretentious prose than the hallowed European figures (and Talcott Parsons) could never hope to achieve. His theoretical lead is a far better one to follow than the leads of the other eminent theorists of today's sociology.

It is therefore with great pleasure that I have undertaken the task of bringing out a new edition of Collins's first major book; indeed, I leaped at the chance when the idea was first broached to me by the publisher, Dean Birkenkamp. Although the book is more than thirty years old, it remains highly relevant and extremely important today, especially during this period when sociological theory is burdened with postmodernism and various other nonempirical subjectivisms. Established sociologists and graduate students alike can still benefit from a reading of *Conflict sociology*. However, the book is extremely long and thus too expensive to reprint as it is, and so it has been necessary to abridge as well as update it. In abridging this work I have tried to retain those parts that seem most central and that have held up the best. I have retained the first two stratification chapters, the chapter on deference and demeanor, and the one on state, economy, and ideology. I also kept the chapter on wealth and social mobility, although in the interest of saving space, the discussion of mobility was deleted. And I have retained a crucial part of the first chapter where Collins lays out some of his grounding assumptions about sociology as a cumulative science. I have updated *Conflict sociology* largely by drawing on work published by Collins since 1975, but I also discuss the work of other sociologists whose ideas bear directly on the major themes of Collins's book. Every chapter has been updated with new material located at the end of the chapter. I have also added a fairly lengthy afterword, in which I summarize the basic arguments of the sections of the book that have been removed (organizations, intellectual life, and gender) and add discussions of Collins's analyses of educational systems and educational expansion, religion, and historical change. Summaries of the main arguments of Collins's two latest books, *Interaction ritual chains* and *Violence: A micro-sociological theory*, are also provided, and I seek to show how his recent turn

toward a microsociology inspired by Durkheim and Goffman connects to his earlier more macro and more Weber-inspired ideas.

In my updating I have sometimes found it useful to refer back to the original work. In these instances I refer to it as *Conflict sociology 1975*.

This project was a labor of love, and I am very pleased that Randy was confident that I could do the job properly and that he is happy with the final result. Every minute I spent on this project was a joy. I hope that a new generation of sociologists and sociologists-in-the-making will gain as much from the book as I did three decades ago and as I have in rereading it today.

*Stephen K. Sanderson*  
Riverside



## *Author's Original Preface*

Sociology has been pursued for a number of motives. Many have sought in it practical benefits or ideological justifications—or perhaps only a pleasant career delving into some well-guarded academic niche. We have been at it on a large scale for quite some time now, and most of the results are disappointing. I make this judgment from the standpoint of yet another value: that a coherent, powerful, and verified set of explanatory ideas is one of the great things in the world, quite by itself. I do not assume that everyone ought to share this value; apparently too few in the social sciences have, for the promising advances of the past have given rise to little enough cumulative development. Yet practical application, for all the attention given it, has made little real headway, and the ideologists have settled nothing. I would maintain that neither of these enterprises will ever get anywhere, or even indicate where there is to go, until a true social science is made.

They are not the reasons for this book. It is motivated by a glimpse I have caught somewhere along the way of what some of the thinkers and researchers of past and present have accomplished. However incomplete and fragmented, there is a powerful science in the making. I have attempted to pull things together sufficiently to show where we are now.

This book focuses on conflict because I am attempting to be realistic, not because I happen to think conflict is good or bad. After reading this book, anyone who still judges explanatory concepts in terms of their value biases will not have grasped what it is about. Past theorists who have done the most to remove our thinking from the murk of artificially imposed realities that populate our everyday worlds have found a guiding thread for explanation in the existence of plurality and conflict. Their lead is worth special emphasis right now, when there is so much potential for getting our science straight, and so many vestiges of utopian unreality burdening our habitual modes of analysis. Eventually, of course, there will no longer be such a thing as conflict sociology or any other label; there will be only sociology without adjectives.

Looking back, historians will see a great intellectual revolution in the twentieth century—the establishment of a true social science. Whether external observers will find it a desirable thing to happen to the world is open to question. The explorers of this frontier have only one real justification: the adventure itself. It is to this invisible community stretching across the years that this book is dedicated.

I am indebted to Arthur L. Stinchcombe for critical comments on the entire manuscript, and to Joseph R. Gusfield, Aaron Cicourel, Stanford M. Lyman, Herbert Isenberg, and Christine Chaille for comments on various sections. Donald Pilcher kindly provided materials from his own research. Joan Annett, who coauthored Chapter 4, also provided assistance with other chapters. I have learned much from conversations and correspondence with Samuel W. Kaplan, Reinhard Bendix, Harold L. Wilensky, Alvin W. Gouldner, Bennett Berger, Warren O. Hagstrom, and Joseph Ben-David. What there is of value in this book is no doubt taken from them.

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Philadelphia and  
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